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Symbol, Signification, and Hashtags as Violence Against Black Bodies; A Comparative Analysis of Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*

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Abstract: In Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* the concept of Black subjectivity rendered as symbol is represented through the narratives of Harriet and Trayvon Martin. By using Harriet's explanation of becoming symbolic in Cliff's *No Telephone To Heaven* as a lens to examine Trayvon Martin's life and death as narrated in Rankine's *Citizen*, I expand the conversation of symbolic rendering. In Cliff's work, symbolic rendering is achieved through sexual violence in the post-colonial Caribbean context. For Rankine, the post-colonial carceral state in U.S. society becomes the site for the symbolic rendering of policy brutality and racial profiling. Using Saussure's *General Linguistics*, Foucault's concept of the PanOpticon, and bell hooks's *Loving Blackness as Political Action*, I argue that Cliff and Rankine's works illuminate how symbolism becomes violence against Black bodies by rendering the lived experiences of the individual as an object.

"because white men can't police their imagination people are dying" - Claudia Rankine

Symbol is defined as "a thing that represents or stands for something else, a material object representing something abstract" according to Merriam Webster's dictionary. Symbols are glorified and honored as representatives of a shared ideal in a community, to commemorate events, and usually serve as an image of an individual in their absence. Yet in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, the character Harry/Harriet (whom I will refer to as Harriet hereafter) states that she is "not symbol, not allegory" after revealing to her friend and main character, Claire Savage, that she was brutally raped by a white male officer as a child. With the honor and glorification usually associated with being seen as or becoming a symbol, Harriet's rejection of being rendered symbolic illuminates how symbolism becomes violence against Black bodies by rendering the lived experiences of the individual as an object. On the other hand, in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* she discusses the shooting and death of Trayvon Martin, revealing how the prejudice of the law enforcement and the judicial system in America perpetuates violence

against Black people, allowing for the murders of Black men and women at the hands of the police without legal justice. Trayvon Martin and other victims of racialized police brutality thereby become symbols via their deaths and later via hashtags on social media. By becoming hashtags, they become representations of the greater cause of fighting police brutality but are forever symbols rather than subjects. By using Harriet's explanation of becoming symbolic in Cliff's *No Telephone To Heaven* as a lens to examine Trayvon Martin's life and death as narrated in Rankine's *Citizen*, I hope to further expand the conversation of being rendered as a symbol via sexual violence in the post-colonial Caribbean society in Cliff's work to the experience of being rendered as symbol via police brutality and racial profiling in the post-colonial carceral state that is American society. The intention of this paper is to use Saussure's *General Linguistics*, Foucault's "PanOpticon," and bell hooks' *Loving Blackness as Political Action* to reveal how separating the Black victim from their body and humanity in symbolism utilizes Black bodies and their trauma as a signifier for the white violence against the Black community, thereby erasing the victim both metaphorically and literally.

Harriet's rejection of being rendered as a symbol is a direct rejection of the objectification of her victimhood and trauma. Harriet first tells Clare about her experience of being targeted and raped by a white officer after they are approached by a white male patron at a restaurant. Because they play into the stereotypes of the white patron's imagination leaving him with "a story he will tell and tell" (26), a story filled only with archaic and harmful racial stereotypes of African people, Harriet states "there is no need to tell them [her] asshole was split when [she] was a bwai by an officer. "Harriet's refusal to tell her story is refusal to become the 'concept'" in the two-sided psychological relationship Saussure describes between the sign and signified in *Course in General Linguistics*. She is aware that her experiences with violence as a Black embodied queer individual would only be a single story told over and over, a reinforcement of the negative stereotypes of her Blackness and her queerness within the white imagination. She then goes on to tell the story to Clare, sharing the details of how the officer spotted her sitting on the steps of the library and then proceeds to call her "sweet lickle monkey." In his sexually violent act against Harriet the officer denies her personhood by calling her a "monkey," before brutally raping her. Although Harriet states she was "tempted in [her] life to think symbol – that what he did to me is but a symbol for what they did to all of us..." (129), "us" refers to the Black community in Jamaica comprised of the descendants of enslaved Africans, "they" as the white colonizers and their descendants, and "what they did" as the perpetuation of white supremacy and the violence against Black communities both institutionally and socially therein. By stating that she is not a "symbol for what they did to all of us," Harriet rejects her rape by a white man becoming a symbol of the white "raping" or violence of the enslavement and colonization of the Black community in the new world, specifically Jamaica. During the experience with the white patron, Clare and Harriet are made into objects of discourse, symbols for the "African royalty" who were "just as [they] (the white patrons) feared." Harriet is aware of the ways that her lived experience can become a symbol when used as an object in discourse and resists this process of objectification by not allowing herself to become what Saussure calls the "signifier" or "symbol." Contrary to all appearances, language never exists apart from the social fact, for it is a semiological phenomenon. Its social nature is one of its inner characteristics. "Its complete

definition confronts us with two inseparable entities: language and the community of speakers. But under the conditions described language is not living- it has only potential life; we have considered only the social, not the historical, fact” (Saussure 146). In order to become a “symbol” or “allegory” as Harriet states she would be transformed into an object of discourse, a signifier, a vehicle by which others would understand the plight of the community. But as Saussure states “language is not living; it only has potential for life.” Harriet becoming a symbol would bound her forever to the community, but in turn separate her perpetually from herself. Her trauma would no longer be her own, neither would her body because the symbol is neither alive nor free. To be a signifier means to become fixed to the linguistic community that utilizes you. Harriet’s retelling of her story allows her to claim power, but she lets Clare know that she has been tempted to see her trauma as “symbol” or signifier of the traumas of the community as a whole.

Similarly, Trayvon Martin and other Black victims of racialized police brutality thereby become symbols via their deaths and later via hashtags on social media. This process of being rendered as a symbol is precisely the objectification of victimhood and trauma that Harriet rejects in *No Telephone to Heaven*. In the novel, Harriet lets Clare know that she has been tempted to see her trauma as “symbol” or signifier of the traumas of the community as a whole. This temptation is understandable because by becoming a symbol her experience is shared with the community rather than experienced in solitude, thereby immortalizing her via her martyrdom. Martin and the countless other examples of victims of racialized violence at the hand of white officers are the manifestation of this process, by being murdered and then immortalized through their perceived martyrdom. Martin’s murder happens primarily because of the stereotypes and stigmas that were attached to his existence as a Black male. The perception that his assailant George Zimmerman has of Martin plays out in Zimmerman’s white imagination and ultimately leads to Martin’s shooting and death. According to the transcripts from the 911 call Zimmerman makes to the police he is suspicious of Martin because he “looks” suspicious and “up to no good,” assessments he has made only from the fact that Martin is Black.

Zimmerman:

We’ve had some break-ins in my neighborhood and there’s a real suspicious guy. It’s Retreat View Circle. The best address I can give you is 111 Retreat View Circle.

This guy looks like he’s up to no good or he’s on drugs or something. It’s raining and he’s just walking around looking about. [00:25]

911 dispatcher:

OK, is he White, Black, or Hispanic?

Zimmerman:

He looks Black.

Martin's presence in the neighborhood as a Black body is a signifier that Zimmerman's white imagination assigns negative and racially biased meaning to; this is similar to an incident Claudia Rankine describes in her book *Citizen: An American Lyric*. In the novel, Rankine writes a script for a stop-and-frisk situation where a Black professional is stopped unwarrantedly and arrested unjustly by a white police officer. The Black professional says or perhaps thinks to himself "And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always fitting the description" (105). Like the Black professional in Rankine's work Martin fits the description for the "suspicious" thief Zimmerman has by virtue of being Black, in both cases the Black professional and Martin's Blackness is a signifier for that which is criminal. Rankine underscores this process of signification further in the novel stating: "Everything shaded everything darkened everything shadowed is the stripped, is the struck — is the trace, is the aftertaste." (146) Here, Rankine asserts that that which is "shaded" or "darkened" that which is Black is the "stripped", the "trace", the "aftertaste". Rankine furthers her lament of Blackness as the image created in opposition of whiteness. Whiteness is defined as all that which is pure, good, and whole leaves Blackness as only the "trace", thereby Blackness is defined as lack, as evil, and as impure. This ideology is what allows Zimmerman to assign criminality to Martin, and then, in order to rid the community of this perceived threat, becomes the reason for Zimmerman's murder of an innocent Martin. hooks states in *Loving Blackness as Political Activism*: "There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of Blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all Black people" (56). I would like to add to this list the murder and symbolification of all Black people; as exemplified in Martin's experience and Rankine's work, the rendering of Black bodies as symbols services the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy because it utilizes Black bodies and their traumas as a signifier for the violence of whiteness against the Black community by separating the Black victim from their body and humanity, thereby erasing the victim both metaphorically and literally. Trayvon's murder at the hands of Zimmerman and the subsequent backlash turns Trayvon's name and face into a household name. His victimhood is a symbol for the Black community and movements like Black Lives Matter, but Trayvon's life was ended as an expense. This leads one to wonder if the symbol is all that Black victims of racialized violence are left with, subjectivity stripped from them in death as it is in life. Trayvon Martin becomes a signifier/symbol by becoming a hashtag, but as a hashtag, he is used only as an object in discourse, forever a victim in the discussion around him. In their article "The Hashtag as Black Death" Da'Shaun Harrison states "The Hashtag, used as a way to market the murders of Black people, commodifies their deaths, and as such, separates them from the possibility of life before Death. As if to say they have always only ever been dead. It makes them the Other in Death, too..." How does one both acknowledge their lived experiences while also ensuring that the death of these victims is not in vain? Hashtagging on social media has become a popular and prolific aspect of creating mobility around the deaths of Black victims. But as Harrison alludes, it becomes a mode by which the lives of the individuals are stripped of their humanity. If asked whether they would prefer to have a symbol or a son, Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin would prefer the latter but have no choice other than accepting the former. As a symbol, Martin is often

discussed, but as a Black boy, he is much less recognized. Because of his violent passing at the hands of Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin has become synonymous with the greater struggle of the community; he has become a lexicon in the language around police brutality in the U.S. However, Trayvon Martin was a boy with friends and family and he had hopes and dreams. These simplicities of his lived experience are not in discourse daily, instead, the details of his death are studied and discussed at length in hopes of furthering the fight against the killing of unarmed Black and brown women and men. As Harrison states “While their blood still soaks the ground, we throw hashtags in front of the names of Black people murdered by the state and immediately their deaths become their only story. Who is Trayvon beyond his hoodie, his Skittles, and his Arizona Tea?”

On page 134 of *Citizen*, Rankine lists the names of Black victims of police brutality, as the list persists the name lighten on the page disappearing into the whiteness of the blank background. “In Memory of Jordan Russell Davis...In Memory of Stephon Clark... In Memory.” These lines bring new light to the phrase “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” The lengthening of the list demonstrates the passage of time, as time passes new victims are being added to the list while former victims new fade away. Following the list is a powerful quote from Rankine “because white men can’t police their imagination, Black people are dying.” The quote articulates perfectly how Trayvon’s Blackness was translated into signs and symbols of the wretched “other” in Zimmerman’s white imagination. This translation of Trayvon from boy into criminal in the white imagination literally causes the end of his life, rendering him as a symbol forever. The lines of names in Rankine’s work are representative of how the memory of the Black lives that are lost fade out of the consciousness of the general public with the passing of time. The words “In Memory” are swallowed up by the whiteness of the page as the memories of these Black lives are swallowed up by the cruel and unforgiving white supremacist culture of U.S. society. The memories of each individual are metaphorically erased, as they literally vanish from the page. If no new names are added to the list of victims, what would be left after time had completely whitened the page? Nothingness. This perhaps is why the Black community holds fast to the symbols these violent systems make of their victims, holding fast to their names and sharing their hashtags online. Hashtags are an attempt to narrativize the trauma of a community, they are a language that tells the grieving community “you are not forgotten.” If the names are not repeated, they are not remembered, and it is only a matter of time before they are erased by the overwhelming hegemonic power that is whiteness in the United States. In the absence of the demonized Black life — the adoration of the glorified Black symbol emerges. What does the glorification, deification, and love of Black victims of police brutality say about our politics, or how little we truly value Black life? Are Black people only loved in their absence or in their death? It seems that by these standards Black people are more valuable dead than alive. In light of the erasure of Black life in death, Harriet’s temptation or desire to have her trauma signified is understandable, rooted in her desire to signify is a desire to be seen and to be heard. Most importantly there is a desire for the story to be told, so that the story, and by connection, the individual, can be remembered. Quite literally she desires to matter, that her life would become material and significant, rather than invisible. Therefore, systemic violence would necessitate for Harriet to make her suffering into a symbol in order for her memory to survive

her death, as the Black community is tasked to hold onto the narrative. So through Harriet's refusal to become a symbol it becomes illuminated how symbolism utilizes Black bodies and their traumas as a signifier for the violence of whiteness against the Black community by separating the Black victim from their body and humanity, thereby erasing the victim both metaphorically and literally. Although there is a temptation or desire to be seen and made visible via the symbolic, it is only the trauma that becomes permanently visible, the survivor of the trauma is left invisible and unheard. On becoming a symbol/signifier of the Black community Harriet states "But that's not right I only suffered what my mother suffered— no more no less. Not symbol, not allegory, not something in a story or a dialogue by Plato" (129). She states here that it is not right to take her lived experience and trauma and render it as a symbol because she is not an allegory, story, symbol, or theoretical concept. Here, Harriet is defending her personhood rather than being transformed into discourse or language by which the community will be defined. In the next lines she states "No, man, I am merely a person who felt the overgrown cock of a big whiteman pierce the asshole of a lickle Black bwai- there it is. That is all there is to it" (129). This reinforcement is that she is not a symbol but "merely a person" speaks to Harriet's desire to be embodied in her humanity even if her existence is fraught and vulnerable as a Black queer body experiencing the constant threat of violence. Harriet seeks to identify herself with her community that has suffered similarly (specifically her mother) but opposes becoming the signifier for the suffering itself. As the scholarship of Christa Schönfelder suggests trauma is a rupture of the "self", and because of the violence it performs on the "self" trauma resists narrative. What is experienced during traumatic moments is inexpressible, so it is impossible to narrate experiences of trauma because they exceed the bounds of language. The objective of the symbol is grasping at claiming with language that which is lost to trauma. The community seeks to remember their victims as symbols because the violent deaths of these individuals are trauma to the community as a whole. Schönfelder states in her book *Wounds and Words*, "The obsessions with memory and with trauma reinforce each other; a mania for memory is particularly likely to arise at moments of crisis, at times when memory comes to be felt as fragile and threatened – a frequent after-effect of trauma."

Moreover, rendering the victimhood and trauma of Harriet and Trayvon Martin as a symbol of the violence and oppression enacted by whiteness against the greater Black community, mirrors how structural inequality is perpetuated via Foucault's PanOpticon structure by allowing the power to become symbolic. Saussure states "a language constitutes a system The system is a complex mechanism that can be grasped only through reflection: the very ones who use it daily are ignorant of it" (200). The system of language is a complex chain of signification, as is the complex systems of structural inequality that the language constitutes and then reinforces. In her account to Clare, Harriet states clearly that it is an officer, a "big whiteman," who is the perpetrator of the violence against her. By resisting the process where she becomes a symbol for Black victimhood, she also resists the process by which the white officer becomes only a symbol for racialized sexual violence. Rather than allow the violence to become symbolic allowing the perpetrator of the violence to be removed discursively from their actions via the distance between the signified and the signifier through language, Harriet points the proverbial finger back at the actor of violence, rather than the system his violence metaphorically

represents. Saussure states “Since language is a social institution, one might assume a priori that it is governed by prescriptions analogous to those that control communities” (155). Structural inequality that perpetuates violence against Black and queer bodies is made possible and is controlled by the process by which the communities signify. By hiding behind a system of structural inequality, her rapist and his violence against her is made invisible, “and this invisibility is a guarantee of order” (Foucault 200). The “system” can never be prosecuted or convicted because according to Foucault: “Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable” (200).

In the case of Trayvon Martin, and other victims of racialized violence by the police, Foucault’s PanOpticon structure in the legal system allows for the murder of Black individuals by white officers without legal recourse for their assailants. The process by which Trayvon Martin and other Black victims are made symbolic and the implications of race, gender, and sexuality in the violence enacted against them clearly reveal the failure of the U.S Court system to bring about “justice” for all, in particular, justice for Black people. Rankine states “My brothers are notorious. They have not been to prison. They have been imprisoned. The prison is not a place you enter. It is no place. My brothers are notorious.”

Here we see Foucault’s PanOpticon at work.

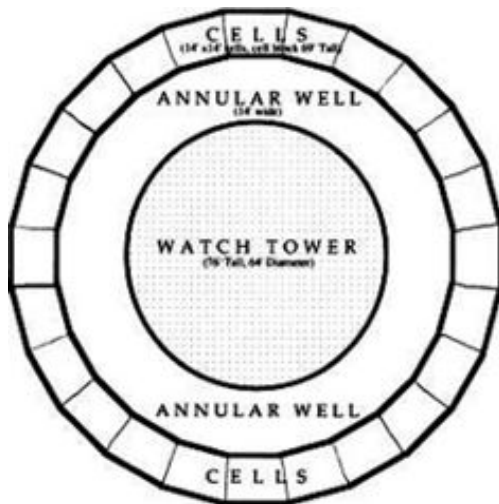
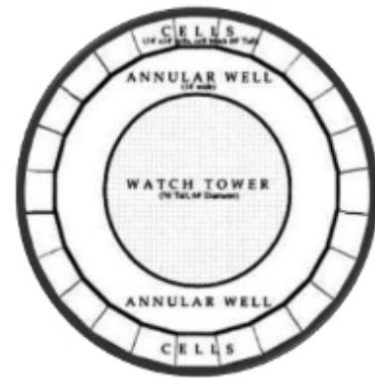


Fig 1. The PanOpticon structure; “# FOUCAULT /// Episode 4: The Cartography of Power.” THE FUNAMBULIST MAGAZINE, 8 July 2015, thefunambulist.net/history/foucault-episode-4-the-cartography-of-power.

Bentham's (1748-1842) Panopticon

- The Panopticon is a type of institutional building designed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century.
- The concept of the design is to allow a single watchman to observe (-opticon) all (pan-) inmates of an institution without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched.
- The design consists of a circular structure with an "inspection house" at its centre, from which the manager or staff of the institution are able to watch the inmates, who are stationed around the perimeter. Bentham conceived the basic plan as being equally applicable to hospitals, schools, sanatoriums, daycares, and asylums, but he devoted most of his efforts to developing a design for a Panopticon prison, and it is his prison which is most widely understood by the term.



21-Nov-14

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Fig 2. Bentham's PanOpticon explained; source: Rinu, Krishna K. PanOpticism Quick Overview. Institute of English.

Even those who are not physically in prison are imprisoned by the ideological power of the structure on the society. By this principle, there is no possibility for justice for the symbol of victimhood because there is no possibility of accountability for the symbol of violence. In the PanOpticon, power is individualized by having the prisoner become objects under surveillance. According to Foucault, "[The prisoner] I seen, but does not see, is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (200). This objectification is what Harriet is opposing through her resistance to becoming a symbol. Symbols are seen, they are objects, but they are never "subjects in communication" because symbols cannot speak for themselves. Instead, they exist in the paradox of always speaking for the "whole" other while their own subjectivity simultaneously is silenced. As Foucault states, "the major effect of the PanOpticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). Symbols are hypervisible while the individuals they represent are made invisible through erasure both metaphorically (through discourse) and literally (through death).

Hypervisibility of the body but the invisibility of the subject lends itself to violence on multiple levels of existence for Black people. Hypervisibility renders the Black person as only their body and throughout the history of the U.S., the Black body has been relegated to use and abuse,

initially through chattel slavery, then continuing through the prison industrial complex. Objects are not free to have choice or free will, so the Black subject is a threat to the status quo of the U.S. systems that thrive off the use and exploitation of Black bodies as objects. Quite often we see the Black body become the symbol of danger. For example, in the case of Trayvon Martin and cases of police brutality like his, police officers state that they see Black men as “threats.” This language, in particular, plays into the notion that the officer “fear” for their lives when facing unarmed Black men, and in the case of Martin unarmed Black teenagers. The idea that police are killing unarmed Black men and women because they are afraid is an ongoing misnomer that allows for police officers to go free without being held accountable for killing Black people who pose no real threat to them. It should be questioned how and why the officers who have a gun are in fear of Black civilians who are unarmed. “Fear” here is really anti-Blackness and an understanding that with the police badge comes the power to kill without recourse. This is really racism and the unchecked power officers, and the legal system have over Black people because of the white supremacist racial hierarchy in the U.S. Because of this language, Black bodies are signified as threats to be feared, and this rhetoric plays out very heinously in the courts. Officers can say they were in “fear” after they pulled the trigger and ended Black lives unnecessarily, yet white men with automatic weapons are taken down and brought in alive (ex: Dylan Roof after a mass shooting of a Black church in Charleston is apprehended alive while carrying multiple automatic weapons). This issue is beyond fear and goes back to Foucault’s statement of a real subjection or oppression “born mechanically from a fictitious relation.” In order to shift this narrative, we need to open up the conversation beyond fear because it is this misnomer of fear that allows it to be legal for police to kill us out of fear. Changing the narrative or story requires not only changing the language around Black bodies but resisting the process by which Black bodies become signifiers for “fear,” “threat,” or to quote Zimmerman “suspicious” and “up to no good.” This is beyond fear. It is racism; it is structural inequality; it is anti-Blackness; it is the inherent racism of the police as an institution; it is the legal system and the law enforcement perpetuating what Sylvia Wynter calls “judicial murder” in her article “No Humans Involved.” It is many things, but it is not simply fear.

In conclusion, the symbolism and signification manifest as violence against Black bodies in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* and Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*. The concept of the Black subjectivity being rendered as a symbol is represented through the different narratives of Harriet and Trayvon Martin and can be applied to the issue of symbolism, martyrdom, and its connection to Black death and trauma in a carceral state that is the U.S. Primarily through Harriet’s rejection of being rendered a symbol and through the process by which Trayvon Martin becomes a symbol, it becomes apparent how the separating of the Black victim from their body and humanity via symbolism utilizes Black trauma as a signifier for the trauma of the Black community, thereby erasing the victim both metaphorically and literally. This process is systematized and valorized through our institutions of power because these systems are constituted by the language and ideologies that allow this process of symbolic disembodiment to exist and thrive. Because of the nature of systems, the disempowerment of the “other” by symbolic violence creates empowerment for systems of inequality to enact violence metaphysically. This process where the subjectivity of the Black individual is stripped creates

the sort of invisibility that allows “another small Black bwai, even one bleeding and crying” (Cliff 129) to go unnoticed on the street after a devastating rape. This reflects Foucault’s “PanOpticon” in multiple ways, allowing even for an internalized system of power where discipline and violence are regulated by the community, “some of us, many of us, also do it to each other” (Cliff 129). As society constructs language, it is imperative that we are aware of the ways our language commits and creates violence against the marginalized others in our society. Because “a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation” (Foucault 202), it is imperative to not only examine our language but deconstruct it in order to dismantle the innately oppressive system within. Ultimately, by resisting the death that comes by being rendered symbolic, Harriet lives to tell her own story and define for herself what her own experiences signify whereas Trayvon Martin lives on as a symbol in the greater discourse on Blackness and hierarchical racial violence. Harriet tells Clare “I tell you this because I want you to know about me.” There is power in her choosing to tell her story, rather than allowing her story to be consumed as an object of discourse. Those who are killed are not given the power to tell their own stories, instead, they become the stories we tell.

About the Author

Lynn Saniorah Edouard is currently a Ph.D. student at City University New York, Graduate Center, pursuing her doctorate in Comparative Literature. Born in Port Au Prince, Haiti, Saniorah’s parents emigrated to the U.S when she was only 5 years old to afford her the privilege of an education. Saniorah has been recognized as a scholar by the Trayvon Martin Foundation, the Miami Foundation, and the AP National Board. Notably, Saniorah was granted a fellowship from the CUNY Provost office, as well as the Andrew Mellon Foundation HSI Pathways to the Professoriate fellowship. Aside from being a student and teaching at the college level, Saniorah is an activist, writer, preacher, and dancer. She is passionate about community outreach and founded Lynn Loves Literacy, a nonprofit with a mission to eradicate illiteracy among underprivileged youth in Miami and Haiti by fostering a genuine love for reading and providing education and resources. Whether teaching, learning or serving Saniorah aims to love and serves others in everything she does.

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